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ABSTRACT

Humor is an important tool for the teacher in college classrooms. Generally, laughter is a great benefit in anyone's life, having even physiological influence. Laughter reduces stress and may facilitate creativity. However, the use of humor can both enhance and hinder the learning process. Various researchers have tried to identify structures, types, and categories of humor. Humor in the classroom setting is undesirable if a student is the target of the joke. On the other hand, when care is taken by the instructor to avoid negative consequences, humor has been shown to have a positive effect in the classroom. The gender of the participants in the humorous transaction may dramatically influence the outcome of the situation. Also, there are significant differences in how the genders react to humor. Overall, the frequency and use of humor correlates positively to perceived appeal, effectiveness, and delivery, but for male instructors only. Instructors can encourage laughing at humorous circumstances to build a feeling of unity in the classroom. They can also use humorous examples or present concepts humorously to help students comprehend and retain lecture material. Effective instructors must bring a full range of resources into today's classroom, and one of these resources, used moderately and appropriately, is laughter. Fifteen principles for using humor in the college classroom are included to provide guidance for college instructors. (Thirty-seven references are attached.) (HB)

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The Power of Humor in the College Classroom

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Running Head: THE POWER OF HUMOR IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the use and power of humor in the college classroom. Specific attention is given to the benefits of laughter in everyone's lives, how humor in the college classroom can enhance as well as hinder the learning process, the types of humor used in educational settings, how the gender of the participants in the humorous transaction may influence outcomes, and the effects of humor on student learning. As a summation of this research project, 15 principles for using humor in the college classroom are included to provide guidance for college instructors.

HUMOR AND LAUGHTER

Think back to the last time you laughed. How did that laughter make you feel? Chances are it made you feel good, put you in higher spirits, gave you a little boost of energy and enthusiasm. Intuitively we know laughter makes us feel better and thus must be good for us. Intuitively we know that feeling good makes us more receptive to the situations we face each day. Instructors in educational environments constantly seek ways to make the classroom more conducive to learning. However, only recently have the effects of laughter and the power of humor begun to be scientifically examined. The direct assessment of humor in education has had a low priority in educational research and most of the information about humor has been a by-product of other foci (Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillmann, 1980).

One of the most well-known names in the study of humor and the effects of laughter is Norman Cousins. Cousins is known for having survived ankylosing spondylitis (a degenerative disease that attacks the body's connective tissue) and for attributing his survival, in large part, to humor. In *The New England Journal of Medicine* in 1976, Cousins writes that "ten minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect" that gave him "at least two hours of pain-free sleep" (Aspects of laughter, 1990, p. 25). "Laughter activated the release of endorphins, the body's own pain-reducing substance" (Cousins, 1990, p. 39).

Laughter is how a body responds to humor. When a person perceives something as humorous, the brain signals the body to gulp in oxygen and shudder, stimulating various organs. Dr. Marvin E. Herring of the School of Osteopathic Medicine in New Jersey says, "The diaphragm, thorax, abdomen, heart, lungs, and even the liver are given a massage during a hearty laugh" (Cousins, 1990, p. 34). Dr. William Fry of Stanford Medical School likens laughter to exercise and says, "Ten seconds of vigorous

laughter can double the heart rate as much as ten minutes of strenuous rowing" (Cousins, 1989a, p. 22). Cousins describes laughter as "internal jogging" (Cousins, 1990, p. 34).

EFFECTS OF LAUGHTER

Before examining the effects of laughter in the college classroom, it is enlightening to look at some of the research on laughter that has been done in other areas. In studying the effects of laughter on the human body, medical researchers have discovered an assortment of beneficial changes – from the enhanced respiration and anesthetic effect noted by Cousins to increases in the number of disease-fighting immune cells. For example, researchers at Western New England College in Springfield, Massachusetts, measured laughter's influence on infection-fighting antibodies. Subjects who watched a lecture on anxiety displayed no change in antibody levels, but subjects who watched a comedy show displayed a significant increase in antibodies, specifically those that combat respiratory infections (Jones, 1991, p. 71). Furthermore, researchers have discovered a link between laughter and the reduction of stress and between laughter and an increase in creativity.

Laughter and Stress

When we're anxious, our bodies release stress hormones, which suppress our immune system and make us more susceptible to illness (Jones, 1991, p. 71). Laughter may have the opposite effect of stress. Stress is part of the classroom environment. Instructors have the stress of collecting and presenting the material, and students have the stress of studying and understanding the material and taking tests to demonstrate that understanding. When people are tense, they make more mistakes and have more accidents. But laughing may release tension and reduce the risk of failure. People who laugh also are seen as warmer, more confident, and more accepting. "When you laugh

at yourself, people assume that you're not going to judge them too harshly either," explains Joyce Anisman-Saltman, special education professor at Southern Connecticut State University. "That puts people at ease. It gives them permission not to be perfect" (Jones, 1991, p. 71).

Laughter and Creativity

In addition to reducing stress, laughter may facilitate creativity by releasing tension. Students have been shown to be more creative when humor is used in the classroom. In a study at Cornell University, researchers randomly assigned 65 students to watch either a film of broadcast bloopers or a math film. Then both groups were given a problem to solve. The students who watched the funny film had greater success solving the problem. It may be that humor helps the mind switch from its usual patterns of logic to more creative patterns. "When you're experiencing stress, you focus on that stress and not on problem-solving," says Dr. Barbara Mackoff, a psychologist at Cornell University. "Humor allows you to break that cycle" (Jones, 1991, p. 72). Laughter not only reduces stress and increases creativity, but also it can help you perform better, boost your energy, and prevent burnout, says Mackoff (Jones, 1991, p. 71). This would be beneficial for students as well as instructors.

HUMOR IN EDUCATION

If humor reduces stress, increases creativity, and boosts energy in the above situations, it seems reasonable to think it would have similar benefits in the classroom. It would be expected that instructors who perform better and are energetic would be evaluated more favorably by students. It also seems reasonable to think that the reduction of stress and the increase in creativity would facilitate student learning. However, there seems to be a schizophrenic attitude toward humor in our society. Many instructors have come to believe that laughter is for private situations, not for

the classroom, and children commonly are warned to "wipe that smile off your face and start studying" (Jones, 1991, p. 72). These notions are evident throughout our educational system, even in higher education.

The earliest universities were a product of the Middle Ages. At such institutions, students paid professors directly and expected them to follow a specified text and explain problems (Bryant, Comisky, & Zillmann, 1979, p. 110). The norms for teaching did not include humor, and the educational ideal of seriousness persisted until the mid-twentieth century (Bryant, et al., 1979, p. 110).

Until the late 1970s, there was no empirical evidence to substantiate the benefits of humor in college instruction (Bryant et al., 1979). The research that had been done reported equivocal results, negative effects, or limited increases in learning but nonetheless resulted in claims that humor facilitates attention and motivation, improves instructor-student rapport, and makes taboo subjects more acceptable (Bryant et al., 1979, p. 111).

TAXONOMIES OF HUMOR

Despite the paucity of research regarding the use and effects of humor in the college classroom, a handful of theorists have identified key concepts in this area of instructional communication. Sigmund Freud completed a significant amount of work on the psychoanalytic aspects of humor in the earlier part of this century. His 1905 book *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious* and numerous original papers on the subject consider humor in a variety of ways (Freud, 1928). First, Freud notes that there are three basic types of joke techniques: (1) the use of the sound instead of the meaning of the word, (2) the "rediscovery of the familiar" in a new situation, and (3) the use of nonsense as a release from the usual rules of intellectual sense. He further divides jokes into two distinct groups: (a) innocent jokes or jests, and (b) tendentious

jokes. Freud says that when we joke, we confirm our identity via something outside ourselves, generally making this connection suddenly and playfully. While everyone makes this connection, the type or reason for making the connection is idiosyncratic.

In his collection of original papers published in 1928, Freud expands on his earlier work by breaking down the process of humor in culture. He says it is a two-part process: One person may take a humorous attitude while a second person acts as a spectator and derives enjoyment from the attitude of the first. Or there may be two people concerned, one of whom does not share in producing the humorous effect but is regarded by the other as a humorous gift.

Freud believes humor has a liberating element. Humor denies reality and triumphs over the pleasure principle. He theorizes that the humorist acquires superiority by assuming the role of grown-up while reducing the listeners to children. Despite his ominous conclusions, Freud views humor as a rare and precious gift. He says not everyone is capable of a humorous attitude, and some do not even have the capacity to derive pleasure from humor when it is presented by others.

In these seminal works, Freud presents a foundation for the later study of humor and its effects in such contexts as the college classroom. It was only in the late 1970s that structured and unified definitions of types of humor were created. Although the use of humor in the classroom remains a subject area with limited research, the existing work is quite thorough. Modern researchers such as Bryant, Comisky, Crane, and Zillmann have developed classifications and models for studying the types of humor in the college classroom.

Units of Humor

In two related articles, "Teachers' Humor in the College Classroom" (1979) and "Relationship between College Teachers' Use of Humor in the Classroom and Students'

Evaluations of their Teachers" (1980), these four researchers coded and studied six units of humor used in the college classroom.

- **Jokes** are relatively short prose buildups followed by a punch line.
- **Riddles** are informative questions with a humorous punch line as an answer.
- **Puns** are similar words or phrases with more than one meaning used simultaneously to play on multiple meanings.
- **Funny stories** are humorous narratives or tales.
- **Humorous comments** are humorous elements not in any other category.
- **Other** units encompassed all remaining humorous items.

Types of Humor

Along with the definitions of the units they examined, the researchers divided the units into types of humor used in the classrooms.

- **Nonsexual hostile** is humor without a sexual theme that puts down a person or thing.
- **Sexual nonhostile** is humor that refers to sex organs or sexual activities.
- **Sexual hostile** is humor that involves sexual content and puts down a person or thing.
- **Nonsense** is humor that relies on the absurd or unusual (Bryant et al., 1979, pp. 112-113).

Targets and Categories of Humor

These researchers further delineated the targets or "victims" of humor as **self**, **student**, or **other**. Bryant, Comisky, Crane, and Zillmann incorporated Freud's work into their studies by discussing the classification procedure used by most scholars. Humor has been categorized as either **tendentious** (biased) or **harmless** (nonsense).

Within the tendentious category, humor is either hostile, sexual, or hostile and sexual as discussed above.

Target Effects

Humor can be used in many different contexts, but it is always situational. According to Cohen (1977), the three laughing situations are (1) to be laughed at (usually an unpleasant or fearful experience), (2) to make other people laugh (a fun, personally rewarding situation), and (3) to be able to laugh at oneself (considered by many to be an admirable quality).

The "target" is the individual who is placed in one of these situations by humor. The target is on the receiving end of the humorous comment, joke, etc. The target is the individual who will be focused on at the time the humor takes place. As noted above, targets of instructor's humor can be self, student, or other. Depending on which of the three laughing situations takes place in the classroom, humor can be a negative or positive influence.

Negative Influences

The basic component of all humor is ridicule. Humor may unconsciously allow a person to get back at the target of the humor. Often humor is used to illustrate the superiority of one group or person (Gruner, 1978), which coincides with Freud's notion that the humorist acquires superiority by assuming the role of grown-up while reducing the listeners to children. It is important to realize that humor can have a negative effect in the college classroom when a student is the target of ridicule. The cruelest situation occurs when the target of humor, the person being laughed at, cannot leave the group. When a student is in the classroom environment, he or she is in just such a situation. If a student becomes a scapegoat, classmates can make his or her life unbearable. The scapegoated student's discomfort can be exacerbated by an

instructor who has a sadistic tendency to use sarcastic humor. In combination with the other students' laughter, the instructor's sarcastic wit can destroy a student's world (Ziv, 1984). Humor in which a student is laughed at can have several negative effects. Although the sender of the humor may have a momentary feeling of superiority, the humor may destroy the targeted individual, cause group dysfunction, or tear the group apart emotionally (Ziv, 1984). Instructors should beware that humor at the student's expense is not conducive to learning. In addition to alienating the targeted student, such humor may instill in the other students a fear that they may be targeted for future humor. A common mistake is when instructors try to be humorous by making fun of something a student does. This is funny only to the instructor and not to the student (Gilliland & Mauritsen, 1971). Jokes regarding ethnicity, handicapped people, or family are situations that are not considered conducive to learning either (Harris, 1989).

Positive Influences

Nonetheless, when care is used to avoid negative consequences, humor has been shown to have a positive effect in the classroom. "The expression of humor in groups reduces anxieties and hostilities and fosters rapport, personal attraction, and group solidarity. Joking is a powerful tactic to reinforce group norms, morality, values, power status, and existing ideology" (Wilson, 1979, p. 231). There are several kinds of positive humor that college instructors can use in the classroom. Instructors who can laugh at themselves teach the lesson of not taking oneself too seriously. Instructors who enjoy the cleverness of a student enhance the student's self-image. And instructors who encourage laughing at humorous circumstances can build a feeling of unity (Harris, 1989). It is also thought that an instructor who can laugh at himself or herself is more likely to develop a warm relationship with students than an instructor

who cannot (Gilliland & Mauritsen, 1971). However, this should not suggest that an instructor should purposely make himself or herself look silly because it can inadvertently damage his or her credibility. (This is discussed in the Self as Target section of Gender Effects below.) Humor is most effective when it is appropriate to the situation, personable, and original and when it contains something of the personality of the instructor or the student.

Humor is a powerful tool in education and can be used within the classroom to put the students at ease and make the learning process more enjoyable. The effective instructor should teach his or her students that laughter in the classroom is acceptable (Gilliland & Mauritsen, 1971). A classroom characterized by frequent laughter is a safe classroom in which the students feel safe to try new things (Harris, 1989).

STUDIES OF HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM

What appears to be the first major study of humor in the college classroom and the most comprehensive study to date was conducted in the late 1970s. In 1979, Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann studied instructor's use of humor in the college classroom to ascertain how instructors incorporate humor into their lectures. Content analysis was performed on humorous incidents from 70 course presentations that had been judged as intended to be funny.

In the 70 presentations, 234 humorous episodes were identified. On the average, instructors tried humor every 15 minutes. About

- 20% used no humor.
- 50% used humor 1-3 times.
- 18% used humor 4-6 times.
- 5% used humor 7-9 times, and
- 5% used humor more than 10 times per class (p. 114)

The researchers found that most college classroom humor was conveyed through funny stories. They also found that much of the humor used by instructors was hostile or sexual (48%) and that most of the humor used by the instructors was seen as spontaneous (65%) (pp. 115-116).

Gender Effects

Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann concluded that, unlike professors of previous eras, contemporary professors use humor in presenting lessons. It should be noted, however, that there are differences in how male and female instructors use humor. With regard to gender, there are some rather striking differences between perceptions, usage, and effects of humor and the gender of the user and the perceiver of the humor.

Gender of Targets

The role of gender and what is perceived as funny was investigated by Cantor (1976), who compared the responses of males and females to several kinds of humor. Both males and females rated cartoons that portrayed a male dominating a female as funnier than one that portrayed a female dominating a male. Although males rated the male-dominant humor as funnier than females did, both rated female-dominant humor equally and significantly lower in degree (Cantor, 1976, p. 166).

The gender of the target of hostile humor was the major determinant of the degree of perceived funniness. Humor that had female targets was rated funnier than humor that had male targets (mean of 12.9 v. 3.5), regardless of whether the evaluator was male or female (Cantor, 1976, p. 169).

Gender of Humorist

In terms of perceptions of the communicator of the humorous act, males who dominated females and females who dominated males were rated as more intelligent

than those of either sex who disparaged a member of their own sex. However, males perceived dominating females as more cruel than dominating males. Similarly, females perceived dominating males as more cruel than dominating females (Cantor, 1976, pp. 170-171).

Self as Target

Another interesting finding Cantor (1976) made was in the area of self-disparagement. She found that females considered humor that portrayed a female making light of herself considerably more funny than males found a self-disparaging female. Females also found self-disparaging males almost as funny. Males, on the other hand, found self-disparaging humor significantly less funny, especially self-disparaging males (Cantor, 1976, pp. 180-182).

The findings of Cantor are similar to those found by Zillmann and Stocking (1976) in their investigation of putdown humor. They discovered that self-disparagers were judged by both males and females as significantly less confident, less witty, and less intelligent than someone who disparaged another person, especially an enemy (Zillmann & Stocking, 1976, p. 156). The hilarity of these situations was somewhat different in that males rated another male attacking an enemy as significantly more funny than a male attacking himself, while females thought a male disparaging himself was funnier (Zillmann & Stocking, 1976, p. 157).

Reasons for Gender Effects

Cantor (1976) gives three plausible explanations for the differences in how the genders react to humor. The first is that "the socialization process in our society promotes the idea of female inferiority and that even women's attitudes toward women are affected in this process" (p. 167). A second explanation stems from the fact that our society ascribes cultural expectations to the male and female social roles. "It may well

be that a man who makes sarcastic comments is viewed as clever and witty, whereas a woman who makes the same comments is perceived as domineering, critical, and cruel" (p. 168). A final possible explanation is that male-dominant humor is more typical in our society, possibly due to the preeminence of male comedians (p. 168). Chapman and Gadfield (1976) also found sex-role concepts to play a part in the perceived funniness of sexual humor. Zillmann and Stocking (1976), writing about putdown humor, state that the cultural dominance/submission sex-typing in our society "should be reflected in preferred types of humor" in males and females (p. 160). They also advanced two other possibilities. First, regardless of gender, people who saw themselves as dominant probably would appreciate disparaging humor more than self-disparaging humor, just as those who were submissive probably would be sympathetic toward others as targets but not toward the self. Also, the same effect could be noted in hierarchical situations such as in the work place (Zillmann & Stocking, 1976, p. 160).

This information provides a background that will make the research into classroom humor easier to rationalize, as there are some striking results that reflect the relationship between stereotypical sex roles and humor.

Gender Effects in the Classroom

Humor in the classroom has significant gender-related effects according to the research uncovered for this project. Regarding usage and content, Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann (1979) discovered that males use more humor in the classroom than females. Males used an average of 3.73 humorous items per class period, while females used only 2.43 (p. 114). The most-used format for humor in the classroom was telling funny stories. Forty-two percent of male humor was in the form of stories, as was 26% of female humor (p. 115). Females used humorous comments more often than males by a margin of 33% to 13% (p. 115). Males featured jokes 21% of the time while females

rarely (3%) used them at all (p. 116). Interestingly, neither gender used puns or riddles to any extent (p. 116).

Females were perceived to be more spontaneous than males in the use of humor in the classroom. Eighty-three percent of female humor was perceived as spontaneous, compared to 62% for males (p. 116). In contrast to males, the content of female humor was more often seen as being related to the educational message and contributing to the educational point.

The targets for the humor seemed to, at times, disagree with the research discussed earlier. Females used themselves, students, and others as the target of their humor about equally. In a contradiction of Zillmann and Stocking's (1976) dominant/submissive sex-role theory, males used self-disparaging humor more than half the time. Bryant, Comisky, and Zillmann (1979) point out that possibly male professors believe student rapport can be improved if they are perceived as more human. However, this type of humor can impair credibility and diminish the effectiveness of a message, which could be the cause of the lower relationship between male use of humor and relevance to the educational message.

Appeal, Effectiveness, and Delivery

A subsequent study by Bryant, Comisky, Crane, and Zillmann (1980) expanded upon these findings to include performance evaluations of male and female professors based on humor usage. This research offers some interesting findings about the relationship between gender and humor. Bryant et al. (1980) investigated three aspects of student evaluations of professors: appeal, effectiveness, and delivery (p. 515). Overall the frequency and use of humor correlated positively to perceived appeal, effectiveness, and delivery, but for male instructors only. The frequency of humor usage by females was not related to student evaluation (p. 515). As reported by Bryant, Comisky, and

Zillmann (1979), males most often made use of funny stories. Those males who frequently used funny stories in their presentations were rated as more appealing and having better delivery skills. Those males who made more frequent use of jokes were associated with enhanced appeal only. The only significant correlation between females and humor type was that females who used puns were evaluated as very ineffective instructors (Bryant et al., 1980, p. 515).

Relation to Educational Message

With regard to the relationship between the humor and the educational message, it was acceptable for males to use humor that distracted students from the lecture topic, and those professors were rated higher in appeal. Females whose humor distracted students from the message were rated exceptionally low on appeal, effectiveness, and delivery. Females whose humor coincided with the educational messages were rated higher but not by any large degree. On the other hand, males whose humor contributed to the educational message were perceived as having higher appeal and delivery skills than noncontributing males (Bryant et al., 1980, p. 516).

Evaluation of Instructor Performance

Thematically, the use of hostile or nonsense humor by male instructors was associated with higher overall performance evaluations, while the use of sexual humor was associated with greater appeal. Female instructors who used hostile, especially sexual-hostile, humor did not receive higher overall evaluations, but they did gain significantly higher appeal ratings. It is important to note that this was the *only* positive correlation of any kind that accrued to female instructors and humor use. Male instructors who used targets other than themselves or their students received significantly higher effectiveness ratings, and those who used highly abstract or

nonsense humor were rated higher on overall effectiveness, delivery skills, and appeal (Bryant et al., 1980, p. 517).

According to this research, classroom usage of humor should be reserved exclusively for males. While the findings do not indicate any increase in perceived competence, they do suggest higher evaluations of effectiveness, delivery, and appeal. As to why these same benefits do not accrue to females is difficult to answer. The possible reasons for this relate to the first articles discussed in this section by Cantor (1976) and Zillmann and Stocking (1976). The culturally ascribed sex-roles given to men and women could cause different perceptions and expectations in students as well as different behaviors in the instructors. Bryant et al. (1980) suggest that possibly women are not as experienced at using humor as men are (due to male-dominated comedy entertainment) and thus are just not as good at using humor. Furthermore, most female comedians use self-disparaging humor, which, as noted above, causes the user to be evaluated as less confident, less witty, and less intelligent. Women, as a professional minority, could view this type of humor as inappropriate. Another possibility discussed by Bryant et al. (1980) is that women are just as capable of using humor as men but choose not to use it because "they perceive it to be an element of the 'masculine world' that has traditionally repressed women's efforts to gain equality" (p. 518). It is important to note, however, that this research is relatively old (ten years) and that new research has not substantiated these findings.

Effects on Instructor Evaluation

As noted above, perceived instructor effectiveness is related to the gender of the instructor, the gender of the perceiver, and the gender of the target of the humor. In addition, perceived instructor effectiveness is related to the communicator style of the instructor (Norton, 1977). The communicator style of the instructor may significantly

reduce psychological distance between students and instructors (Nussbaum & Scott, 1980), and dramatic style, which includes the use of humor, consistently appears as an element of effective instructor behavior. It also has been found that instructors who are more effective at humor are perceived as being more effective overall (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988).

The use of humor in the classroom has been a controversial topic. Some researchers have stressed negative effects, while others have stressed the positive. However, humor appears to be a normal aspect of pedagogy in this century, and the humor of instructors has been found to be positively related to evaluations of their competence (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988). Instructor's use of humor is consistently rated in the top ten categories of student criteria for teaching appeal, and lack of a sense of humor has been rated the twelfth most frequently undesirable instructor characteristic (Bryant, Comisky, Crane, & Zillmann, 1980).

The relationship between positive instructor evaluations and the use of humor is based on the students' perceptions of how much they learn and how positively they feel about the course content and the instructor. Specifically, instructors who use a higher degree of personal anecdotes not related to the subject, general anecdotes related to the subject, and overall use of humorous stories positively affected attitudes toward the instructor, behaviors recommended, and overall attitude and effect. Humor in the classroom appears to create a sense of immediacy between instructor and student and therefore increases evaluations of instructor effectiveness (Gorham & Christophel, 1990, p. 61).

It appears that humor's relation to the educational message is critical in determining its effectiveness as a learning facilitator. The instructor who is perceived

as effective by students will use humor to add to the content of education and contribute to the point (Bryant, Comisky, & Zillmann, 1979).

In 1980, Bryant, Comisky, Crane, and Zillmann studied the relationship between college instructors' use of humor in the classroom and students' evaluations of their instructors. In this study, the researchers examined the ways male and female college instructors used humor in the classroom and the effect of this usage on instructor evaluation by their students. (For an account of this study, see the Appeal, Effectiveness, and Delivery section of Gender Effects in the Classroom above.) The most important finding of this study was that there is a vastly different system operating between humor and the gender of the instructor. In almost all instances, female instructors' use of humor was correlated to negative evaluations while male instructors' use of humor was correlated to positive evaluations. The only positive correlation between humor use and evaluation for females was when the type of humor used was either hostile or sexual-hostile. Overall, the more of any type of humor used by male instructors, the better their ratings across all dimensions. The researchers recommend that females exercise caution in their use of humor if they decide to use it at all.

Effects on Student Learning

It is evident that the effectiveness of humor in the college classroom is influenced by gender and target distinctions. But the crucial concern is how humor influences student learning. In 1974 psychologist Murray Weinberg studied 140 college students to determine how humor interacts with anxiety and intelligence to affect the learning process. He hypothesized that humor reduces anxiety and makes learning easier, but he found his hypothesis far too simplified in light of his results.

Six classes of 20 students heard a taped lecture while a seventh class heard no lecture at all. Two of the classes heard a lecture filled with humorous examples relevant to the material, two heard a lecture filled with nonhumorous examples relevant to the material, and two heard a lecture with no examples at all. Each of the seven classes then completed a multiple-choice test on the material, an evaluation of the lecture material, and an anxiety and intelligence test. The students were then grouped according to high or low anxiety and high or low intelligence.

The results indicate that the use of examples seems to facilitate learning, and humorous examples may produce even better test results, but the difference was not significant. In fact, humor may be detrimental when the pressure to perform makes students anxious, especially with less intelligent students. However, if the student is intelligent and does not experience test anxiety, humor may help the learning process. Then again, if the student is very intelligent and very anxious or not intelligent and not anxious, humor may have no effect at all. "In the light of the present study's findings," says Weinberg, "the assumption that humor is invariably an asset must be questioned" (p. 71).

Instructor Immediacy

In 1990 Gorham and Christophel studied the relationship among instructors' use of humor in the classroom, immediacy, and student learning. Previous research had concluded that instructors who used humor received high evaluations and that the amount of humor an instructor used in class was highly related to students' perceptions of how much they learned and how positive they felt about the course content and the instructor. Gorham and Christophel sought to analyze "the quality of humor associated with such positive cognitive and affective learning outcomes" (p. 49).

Undergraduate students completed a questionnaire reporting the immediacy behaviors of one of their instructors and their cognitive and affective learning in that class. They also observed and recorded that instructor's use of humor over five class meetings.

Results indicated a relationship between the amount and/or type of humor used by instructors and student learning. Gorham and Christophel found that instructors who used a higher degree of brief tendentious humorous comments, jokes aimed at the students, and jokes about themselves negatively affected attitudes toward the behaviors recommended in the course, intent to enroll in another course of related content, overall behavioral intent, and overall effect. This coincides with the negative effects of student-targeted humor noted by Ziv (1984) and with the negative effects of self-targeted humor noted by Cantor (1976) and Zillmann and Stocking (1976) reported elsewhere in this paper. It is contrary to findings by Harris (1979), which indicate that instructors who can laugh at themselves teach the lesson of not taking oneself too seriously and can build a sense of unity in the classroom, also noted elsewhere in this paper.

Results also indicated that the gender of the instructor affected the correlation of the humor variables to the learning measures. There were no significant relationship between humor use by female instructors and student learning, but the relationship was significant for male instructors. The gender of the student also affected the correlation of humor and learning. An instructor's use of humor influenced male students more than female students. Finally, the researchers found that high immediacy instructors used more humor than moderate and low immediacy instructors. Also, low immediacy instructors tended to make more self-disparaging comments while moderate and high immediacy instructors used more physical and vocal humor. The

researchers conclude that the relationship between instructor use of humor in the classroom and student learning is best understood when examined in conjunction with instructor immediacy. "The total number of humorous incidents recorded for each instructor was positively correlated with the frequency of his/her use of other verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors, and the overall use of verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors was highly correlated with learning outcomes" (Gorham & Christophel, 1990, p. 58).

Gorham and Christophel also concluded that high immediacy instructors who engage in a high degree of storytelling may negatively affect student learning. The reason appears to be that when instructors establish high immediacy through other behaviors, their stories are viewed as digressions. Gorham and Christophel's research also indicated that male students found tendentious comments funnier than females did and that students found the amount and type of humor used by male instructors to be more influential. However, contrary to previous research, the use of humor by female instructors did not appear to have a negative effect (p. 59).

In conclusion, high immediacy instructors appear to use more humor and engender more learning. However, the type of humor the instructor uses is very important. Humor used by male instructors seems to be more effective than humor used by female instructors. There does not seem to be a negative correlation between the use of humor by female instructors and student learning as previous studies have indicated. Male students are more influenced by humor than female students. Finally, instructors' use of other immediacy behaviors along with humor influences the humor-learning relationship. It is the quality not the quantity of humor that counts. High immediacy instructors do not have to use humor as much to get positive cognitive effects, while low immediacy instructors have to use other immediacy behaviors along with humor in

order to get positive cognitive effects. "It appears that teacher's use of humor in the classroom is related to learning and that the most desirable learning outcomes are associated with the quality as much as the quantity of humor used in conjunction with other immediacy behaviors" (Gorham & Christophel, 1990, p. 61).

Interaction with Course Content

In 1988, Downs, Javidi, and Nussbaum analyzed instructors' verbal communication within the college classroom, focusing on humor, self-disclosure, and narratives. In this study, two sets of instructors were analyzed to determine their use of humor in the classroom. The participants in Group I were undistinguished instructors (had not won awards). During each 50-minute lecture, these instructors made an average of 13 humorous attempts, often directed toward course material and relevant to course content. The participants in Group II were award-winning instructors. During each 50-minute lecture, these instructors made 7 humorous attempts and these attempts often played off course material and were relevant to course content.

The results showed that the instructors in Group I used humor, self-disclosure, and narratives more than the award-winning instructors. This supports the notion that too many of these verbal characteristics may be inappropriate and moderate amounts are better. Possibly the award-winning instructors could differentiate moderate from excessive use of these behaviors, thus contributing to their overall perceived effectiveness. Both groups used humor more frequently than reported in previous research.

CONCLUSION

As shown above, laughter is good for us and humor is one characteristic of a good classroom environment. Furthermore, today's professors appear to be establishing new norms for pedagogy that include humor in instruction. However, because the research

is very limited and very recent and because of the influential gender issues noted above, college instructors may want to use humor carefully. The following principles have been culled from the research reviewed in this project in an effort to provide guidance for college instructors.

Principles for Humor in the College Classroom

1. Instructors can encourage laughing at humorous circumstances to build a feeling of unity in the classroom.
2. Instructors can use humorous examples and present concepts humorously to help students comprehend and retain lecture material.
3. Humor should be appropriate to the situation, personable, and original, and it should contain something of the personality of the instructor or the student.
4. Instructors may not want to use humor in tests or other anxiety-producing situations. Humor has been shown to be detrimental when pressure to perform makes students anxious, particularly with less intelligent students.
5. The target of the humor should be something or someone other than the student or the instructor.
6. Instructors should take special care to avoid self-disparaging humor because it can undermine their credibility and make them seem less confident and less intelligent.
7. Even though humor that has female targets is perceived as funnier than humor that has male targets, caution should be used so as not to perpetuate sexist notions.
8. Male instructors can use almost all units and types of humor to increase their evaluation ratings.
9. Female instructors should avoid the use of puns or they are likely to greatly decrease their effectiveness ratings.

10. Female instructors may be able to increase their appeal ratings but not their overall evaluations by using hostile, especially sexual-hostile, humor. This is one of the few positive correlations between female instructors and use of humor.
11. Instructors who establish high immediacy through behaviors other than humor may not want to use a high degree of storytelling because it may be seen as a digression.
12. Instructors can use funny stories related to the topic to improve students' overall attitudes.
13. Male instructors can use topic-related humor to increase their ratings, but female instructors who use topic-related humor will achieve only marginally higher ratings.
14. Male instructors can use humor that distracts students from the lecture topic and still achieve high appeal ratings, but female instructors who do so will likely be rated lower in appeal, effectiveness, and delivery.
15. To be perceived as effective by students, instructors should use humor that adds to the content of education and contributes to the point.

The jury is still out on how female instructors' use of humor influences students. Possibly as female instructors become more experienced with using humor their influence will become more positive.

Since instructor's use of humor is consistently rated in the top ten categories of student criteria for teaching appeal and since lack of a sense of humor has been rated the twelfth most frequently undesirable instructor characteristic, instructors may want to consider incorporating a little laughter into their lectures in accordance with the above principles. A touch of relevant humor will perk up even the dullest topics. Instructors may want to prepare lecture notes and then come up with humor to

illustrate key points. Useful sources of humor include cartoons, quotes, observations, funny letters, and personal anecdotes. Instructors who are uncomfortable with quips can use other nonverbal ways to convey humor, including funny wall hangings and strategically placed cartoons.

Both instructors and students experience a great deal of stress in the college classroom, but laughter can reduce that stress. "If you stand rigidly in the face of stress, you are much more easily knocked off balance. If you are flexible mentally, you are in a much better position to roll with the punches that life throws you" (Walter, 1990, p. 44). Laughter not only counteracts stress, but it also increases energy and creativity. "With the reduction of stress through laughter, there is more time and energy left to learn and create. The instructor and students feel a freedom that encourages divergent thinking and creativity" (Walter, 1990, p. 44). When students are free to laugh, they become less apprehensive. When instructors are free to laugh, they see students differently and are less likely to be critical (Walter, 1990, p. 44).

If Norman Cousins can improve his health with laughter, then maybe instructors can improve their teaching effectiveness with laughter as well. Just as Cousins attributes humor with overcoming the obstacles to health, instructors too may be able to use humor to overcome obstacles to learning in the classroom. But just as Cousins "didn't regard the use of laughter as a substitute for traditional medical care" (Cousins, 1989a, p. 22), instructors too must not regard the use of laughter as a substitute for traditional instruction. They must bring a full range of resources into the college classroom – from current texts, relevant exercises, and a sound educational foundation, to enthusiasm for the material, compassion for the students, and a goal to make the classroom a positive learning environment. A healthy injection of humor may help.

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